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# JOHN MILTON

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# AND THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

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A Study in the Sociology of Literature

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Andrew Milner

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Literature

Andrew Milner



*For my parents*  
Dorothy and John Milner

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# I Literature and Society: The Problem of Method

When Lucien Goldmann began his first major work, the early study of the tragic philosophy of Immanuel Kant, he found it necessary to apologise to his readers for the apparent 'rashness' of his initial decision to commence the analysis with an account of a set of problems which were empirical and sociological, rather than, in the conventional sense of the term, philosophical.<sup>1</sup> In France itself, Goldmann's own later study of Jansenism, *The Hidden God*,<sup>2</sup> established, almost single-handedly, the right to exist of a sociology of literature and of philosophy. But in England events have proceeded rather less rapidly. The predominant empiricism of English literary-critical ideology has proved stubbornly and tenaciously resistant to all attempts at theorisation. Leavis's refusal *as a matter of principle* to indulge in generalisation, a refusal made explicit in his famous reply to Rene Wellek,<sup>3</sup> is thus indicative of a wider, more general, and specifically English disdain for theoretical analysis. Against the background of such an intellectual climate, it appears necessary to attempt a brief justification, at least, for beginning a study of the prose and poetical works of John Milton with a 'theoretical' chapter which takes as its prime focus the general problem of the relationship between 'literature' and 'society'. Such a lengthy discussion of methodology is, in fact, necessitated by the existence of an intellectual orthodoxy which is not only anti-theoretical in general, but which is also specifically committed to a view of the sociology of literature as an impossible or, at best, an undesirable project. The anonymous authors of a recent, collectively composed account of various approaches to the study of literature, define this orthodoxy—that is, the literary-critical orthodoxy of the English-speaking world—in the following manner:

The core assumption which gives coherence to traditional literary-criticism as a practice is that *literary works are communications of a*

*radically distinctive kind*. They are autonomous productions of the activity of literary expression. It is in the name of this claim that studies of the author's life, his times and his society, his stated purposes, his working drafts, etc. are *subordinated* to the reading and interpretation of *the text itself*.<sup>4</sup>

This particular form of literary-critical ideology has been especially influential in the United States where, since the late 1930s, literary criticism has been premised, to a quite remarkable extent, on the more general propositions of the New Criticism of John Crowe Ransom.<sup>5</sup> In England, the position has been complicated somewhat by the 'sociological' aspirations of the Leavis school. But nonetheless, in so far as Leavisian literary criticism has attained a degree of general acceptance, it has done so by virtue of the peculiar combination of its insistence on the specificity of the literary text, and its elitist hostility to 'mass' culture, rather than of its more serious sociological intentions. Recent years have, of course, witnessed a number of major sociological incursions into literary-critical territory. But its essential contours remain much the same as ever. A reasonably prolonged discussion of method thus proves necessary in order to establish, as it were, the very ground upon which we stand. Let us turn now to an extended survey of the terrain which lies before us.

### 1 *Marx's Sociology of the Forms of Consciousness*

Our starting point, the most salient feature in the sociological 'landscape', is surely Marx's notion that literary production, as a form of intellectual production, is not completely autonomous, that it is, in some way, dependent upon extra-literary factors, and that, moreover, the economic factor in social life plays an especially privileged role in the complex process of determination of which social reality, including literary production, is the outcome. Marx's own initial interests were, in fact, essentially 'aesthetic' rather than properly 'sociological'. Along with the other Left Hegelians, he had accepted Hegel's notion of an opposition between the classical ideals of Greek art and the anti-aesthetic nature of modern bourgeois reality. But he had rejected both Hegel's own willingness to come to terms with that reality, at the price of art, as Hegel himself perceived it, and the romantic rejection of reality in the name of art, propounded by Marx's one-time collaborator, Bruno Bauer.<sup>6</sup> Rather, he sought to



establish his own materialist sociology as an alternative to these two, equally 'speculative', aesthetic theories. And in the course of this break with Hegelianism, Marx moved from the earlier speculative aesthetic towards a new, materialist sociology of the forms of consciousness. Before we proceed to a precise analysis of the structure of that sociology, it is, however, necessary to emphasise the extent to which Marxist sociology remained a *Hegelian* sociology, the extent to which Marx's materialism remained a *dialectical* materialism. The central category of the Hegelian system is, of course, that of *totality*: for Hegel, the whole is always prior to the parts which it contains within itself. Now this central methodological principle is clearly taken over into Marx's sociology. It is indeed, as Goldmann suggests, a fundamental principle of dialectical materialism that 'the knowledge of empirical facts remains abstract and superficial so long as it is not made concrete by its integration into a whole; and that only this act of integration can enable us to go beyond the incomplete and abstract phenomenon in order to arrive at its concrete essence'.<sup>7</sup> This approach informs the whole of Marx's work, and not merely his earlier youthful writings. Indeed, the section on 'The Method of Political Economy' in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* evidences a thoroughgoing Hegelianism. Here Marx notes that: 'It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population.'<sup>8</sup> But population thus conceived is a mere abstraction, argues Marx, since it can yet be analysed into classes, and these in turn can be analysed in terms of exchange relations. Thus population has to be understood, not as a concrete fact, but rather as 'a rich totality of many determinations and relations'.<sup>9</sup> 'The concrete is concrete', Marx writes, 'because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse.'<sup>10</sup> A genuinely scientific sociology must, then, proceed not in terms of the analysis of abstract 'facts', but rather in terms of an understanding of the interrelationships between the different elements which make up any particular totality, and this totality must in turn be understood in terms of its interrelationships with other elements in a wider totality, and so on. It follows, then, that society itself (and by this we mean a real concrete society, and not the abstract 'society' of functionalist mythology) has to be seen as a concentration of many determinations. This conception of society as a totality of interrelated and contradictory elements does not, and indeed cannot, allow within itself the notion of art and literature as mechanical 'effects' of some other economic 'cause'. This does not

imply any necessary rejection of the formulation of a determining base and a determined superstructure, a formulation which is, as we shall see, at the core of the Marxist sociology of consciousness. What it does imply, however, is a rejection of any notion of determination couched in the terms of mechanical causation. With this cautionary note in mind, we can turn now to a detailed analysis of the structure of Marx's sociology of the forms of consciousness.

How, then, does this sociology of consciousness develop? Marx begins, in *The Holy Family*, simply enough by asserting the primacy of material reality against the speculative metaphysics and speculative aesthetics of the idealist school. He characterises the Hegelian method as one in which, firstly, abstractions are constructed out of the diverse elements of reality, and secondly, these abstractions are then endowed with an active independence which is seen as generating the different concrete realities. In this way, the abstract is made concrete, and the concrete abstract.<sup>11</sup> But this critique of critical criticism is still not yet a sociology proper. The first workings out of the Marxist sociology of consciousness are, in fact, to be found in *The German Ideology*, written with Engels only a year later. There, Marx and Engels formulated the distinctively new, and distinctively sociological, proposition that: 'Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.'<sup>12</sup> This statement is clearly the starting point for any Marxist sociology of consciousness, in that it directs our attention away from 'consciousness' as an isolated phenomenon, and towards the analysis of the structure of 'life' itself. And it is Marx's and Engels's concrete analyses of the real content of 'life', and in particular their understanding of the *class* nature of society, which add real analytical power to this initial formulation. On this basis they are able to offer sociological explanations of a whole range of phenomena. They are able, for example, to locate the material basis of the illusion of 'pure' consciousness in the existence of the division of material and mental labour; to analyse political struggles, such as the struggle for the franchise, as the forms in which class struggles are fought out; and to interpret the ruling ideas of any age as the ideas of its ruling class. This initial proposition that 'life' determines 'consciousness' receives a much more precise formulation in the later *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where Marx writes that, 'The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.'<sup>13</sup> It should be emphasised that this refor-

mulation in no way represents a change in substantive content; it merely represents a move in the direction of greater precision. But Marx does go on, here, to suggest a more sophisticated analysis of the precise relationship which pertains between the economic 'base' and the ideological 'superstructures'. He adds that: 'It is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.'<sup>14</sup> Now this distinction between the economic conditions of production 'which can be determined with the precision of natural science', and the ideological forms, which cannot be determined with such precision, suggests something about the precise meaning of the term determination in the base/superstructure formulation. In much of the Marxist literary criticism of the Stalin period, whether produced in the Soviet Union itself or by westerners sympathetic to Moscow-affiliated Communist Parties, determination was normally understood in the sense of mechanical causation, such that any given mode of production of necessity causes to come into being the appropriate ideological superstructures. Thus, for example, Christopher Caudwell wrote that 'Modern poetry is capitalist poetry'.<sup>15</sup> Now, as we have already noted, this conception of determination as a causal process is incompatible with the wider precepts of Marx's sociological method. But it is equally incompatible with the version of the base/superstructure formula which Marx himself here employs. For if the relationship between base and superstructure is indeed one of mechanical causation, and if we can measure the transformation of the economic conditions of production with the precision of natural science, then it *must* follow that we can do likewise with the ideological forms. The fact that Marx specifically states that such precision is impossible, clearly suggests that the process of determination, in Marx's view at least, cannot be a simple causal one.

How, then, are we to understand Marx's concept of determination? What is the precise relationship between the mode of production and the other elements within the social totality? This relationship can perhaps best be understood if we consider the social system as, in Perry Anderson's words, 'a complex totality, loaded by the predominance in the long run of one level within it—the economy'.<sup>16</sup> This is, in fact, precisely the relationship between the

different elements in the social totality which Engels pointed to when he argued that:

Political, juridicial, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic etc. development is based upon economic development. But all react upon one another and also upon the economic base. It is not that the economic position is *the cause and alone active*, while everything else only has a passive effect. There is, rather, interaction on the basis of economic necessity, which ultimately always asserts itself.<sup>17</sup>

Such a conception of the social totality clearly implies a concept of determination which is very far removed from that of mechanical causation. Raymond Williams has argued for a revaluation of the concept of determination 'towards the setting of limits and the exertion of pressure, and away from a predicted, prefigured and controlled content'.<sup>18</sup> Now such a revaluation is indeed necessary: much of Marxist literary criticism, and especially that developed under the political auspices of Stalinism, has in fact used the notion of determination precisely in the sense of causation. But it needs to be emphasised that Williams's 'revaluation' is not so much a revaluation as a rediscovery of Marx's own Marxism. Marx's concept of determination is, then, concerned not with causation, but rather with *the setting of limits*. But if it is important to remember that the economic base does not mechanically 'cause' the appropriate ideological forms, it is equally important to remember that it does, nonetheless, set certain very definite objective limits on the possibilities for their development. Many Marxist sociologists, and in particular those influenced by the early work of Georg Lukács, have tended, in their concern with the 'totality', to abandon not only the concept of causation, but also the concept of determination itself, and in so doing they have tended to develop the notion that art can, in some way, transcend ideology. Let us consider, very briefly, one such example. Ian Birchall, in an essay on 'the total Marx', argues that Marx's references to *Timon of Athens* in *Capital* and in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* imply that Shakespeare was in some way able to transcend the limitations of Elizabethan society.<sup>19</sup> The first of Birchall's references can easily be discounted. In *Capital*, Marx merely inserts a quotation from Act IV of *Timon*,<sup>20</sup> on the levelling power of money, as an illustration of his general argument, and makes no direct reference whatsoever to Shakespeare's own ideological position. In

the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, however, Marx does directly discuss Shakespeare's views, and in particular he emphasises the playwright's ability to recognise two of the main properties of money, its 'godlike' capacity to transform all human and natural qualities into their opposites, and its 'whoreish' role as the universal procurer of human beings.<sup>21</sup> But at no point does Marx suggest that these Shakespearian insights represent some miraculous transcendence of the limits of Elizabethan ideology. Now Birchall's interpretation of Marx's comments on Shakespeare rests on the implicit assumption that such insights are inexplicable in terms of the social structure of Elizabethan England. The only possible explanation of Birchall's adherence to such a view must be that he regards Shakespeare as a poet of the rising bourgeoisie who should, as such, be incapable of a truly critical stance *vis-à-vis* the developing bourgeois society. But such an analysis of Shakespeare's position in Elizabethan society is essentially superficial. Certainly, Shakespeare came from the bourgeois class; but, as an Elizabethan dramatist, he was also a servant of the court. Caudwell came much closer to a truly sociological analysis when he defined the dramatist as a bourgeois 'with a feudal status'.<sup>22</sup> But even Caudwell is insufficiently precise, since the status of court player is a product, not of feudalism in general, and certainly not of medieval feudalism, but rather of that specific moment in the development of feudal society which gives rise to the specific political form of absolutism. The Elizabethan dramatists were, then, not bourgeois with a feudal status, but rather, as Colin Sparks has argued, a *noblesse de robe*, that is, a section of the bourgeoisie tied inextricably to the institutions of the absolutist state.<sup>23</sup> And, as Goldmann demonstrated, the social position of such groups characteristically gives rise to a tragic world vision which is capable of perceiving the limitations of bourgeois society in just such a way as does Shakespeare. It is only in the light of such concretely sociological analyses, and not by reference to some metaphysical transcendence of the limitations of existing forms of consciousness, that *Timon of Athens*, or for that matter any other work of art, can be fully understood.

In Marx's and Engel's own scattered comments on the relationship between art and society, there is contained an insistence on the 'dialectical' nature of that relationship which precludes both the ahistorical idealism characteristic of literary-critical orthodoxy, and that economic determinism which became the single most distinctive feature of official Marxist writing on literature in the course of the

Stalin period. Since the death of Stalin, modern Marxism, and in particular, modern western Marxism, has been pre-eminently pre-occupied with the problem of developing a theory of the superstructures which avoids the pitfalls of the earlier economic determinism. The danger remains, however, that any attempted reconciliation between the theory of totality and the theory of a determining base and determined superstructure will remain merely formal. Elizabeth and Tom Burns have described the notion of the dialectic, somewhat uncharitably, as 'a life-raft on which it is possible to stand between the clear sky of scientific positivism and the deep waters of post-Kantian phenomenology, and await rescue'.<sup>24</sup> Whilst this would represent an extremely unfair comment on the founders of Marxism themselves, it does, perhaps, have a certain pertinence to more recent dialectical sociologies.<sup>25</sup> And it is certainly true that, all too often, the word 'dialectical' is invoked, not in order to solve a problem, but rather in order to wish it away. If the notion of the dialectic is to prove at all useful, we have an obligation to explain how a dialectical relationship functions, to specify the precise moments of the dialectic. And in respect of literary studies, at least, Marx and Engels can themselves be of little assistance, for neither of them ever worked out a fully developed theory of literature. For such an elaboration, we have to turn elsewhere and, in particular we have to turn to Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism.

## 2 *Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism*<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most important feature of Goldmann's sociological method is that resolution of Marxism with structuralism which enables him to render explicit the structuralist premises upon which Marx's work rests.<sup>27</sup> For Goldmann, as for Marx, sociological analysis is concerned with the way in which 'facts' are related, rather than with 'facts' in the raw. And Goldmann is insistent that any relationship which exists between literature and society has to be understood in terms of *structure* rather than in terms of *content*. As he himself puts it: 'The essential relationship between the life of society and literary creation is not concerned with the content of these two sectors of human reality, but only with the mental structures, with what might be called the categories which shape both the empirical consciousness of a certain social group and the imaginary universe created by the writer.'<sup>28</sup> In rendering explicit a notion of structure

which is only implied in Marx's writings, Goldmann absolves the 'base determines superstructure' theory from the charge of economic determinism. For it is only when both the material base and the various superstructures are understood in terms of their direct empirical content that this theory leads of necessity to a vulgar economic determinism. It is, for example, Caudwell's attempt to reduce the *content* of literature to the *content* of social life which leads him to the notion that modern poetry is merely 'capitalist' poetry. But if we define both the economic base and the superstructures as sets of structural relationships, as Goldmann does, then we are able to understand literature, not as a reflection of reality, but rather as a distinct mode of practice, which stands in a relationship of *structural homology* to the various other modes of human practice. It can be seen, then, that despite the persistency of his attacks upon structuralist orthodoxy, Goldmann is, in fact, very much a structuralist. It remains true for Goldmann, as for any other structuralist writer, that 'comprehension is the bringing to light of a significant structure immanent in the object studied'.<sup>29</sup> His studies of Kant, Pascal and Racine are just as concerned to find 'the primal plan on which everything else depends',<sup>30</sup> as is Todorov's essay on Henry James. However, where Goldmann parts company with mainstream structuralism is in his insistence that 'structures are born from events and from the everyday behaviour of individuals and that, except for the most formal characteristics, there is no permanence in these structures'.<sup>31</sup> From Goldmann's standpoint, and from the standpoint of Marxism generally, most structuralist analysis is incomplete in that it contents itself with the description of a set of structural relations, the existence of which is taken as given, rather than attempting to explain the processes by which such structures are produced.<sup>32</sup> And this incompleteness leads to distortion in that the structure of a particular set of relations can only be fully understood in the context of an analysis of its origins, and of its relationship to other structures. In its insistence on the production of structures, rather than on the mere fact of their existence, Goldmann's structuralism becomes profoundly historical. The central task of the sociologist is defined thus: 'It is when he replaces the work in a historical evolution which he studies as a whole, and when he relates it to the social life of the time at which it was written—which he also looks upon as a whole—that the enquirer can bring out the works's objective meaning.'<sup>33</sup> Sociology should, then, focus itself, at one and the same time, on both the internal structures of given literary works and the wider social structures

which give rise to these purely literary structures. As Goldmann himself admits,<sup>34</sup> this notion of structure derives from the earlier writings of Georg Lukács. But whilst a notion of structure certainly is present in Lukács's earlier writings, both pre-Marxist and Marxist, it is quite definitely absent from the later 'socialist realist' writings which constitute the main foundations of Lukács's reputation as a literary critic and sociologist of literature. In the writings of the Stalin period, Lukács's work was obsessively concerned with the notion of literature as a realistic reflector of the real content of life. In fact, Goldmann's work achieves a reconciliation between the theory of society as a totality and the theory of a determining base and a determined superstructure, a reconciliation which succeeds in building on the achievements of the young Lukács. By contrast, much of Lukács's own subsequent work represents an intellectual regression towards that deterministic Marxism which *History and Class Consciousness*<sup>35</sup> had set out to challenge.

Goldmann's structuralism does not in itself represent a substantial revision of the Marxist theory of literature. His conception of the base/superstructure relationship as *mediated* through the *world visions* of the different social classes does, however, entail such a revision. Goldmann argues, in his earlier writings at least, that there exists, not a direct structural homology between individual works of literature and the nature of social reality, but rather a set of structural homologies between, on the one hand, the individual work of literature and the world vision of the social class to which the writer belongs, and on the other, that world vision and the real social life of the times. The term 'world vision' here refers to 'the whole complex of ideas, aspirations and feelings which links together the members of a social group (a group which, in most cases, assumes the existence of a social class) and which opposes them to members of other social groups'.<sup>36</sup> Such world visions can exist on two different planes: 'that of the *real* consciousness of the group, . . . or that of their *coherent* exceptional expression in great works of philosophy or art'.<sup>37</sup> It is this latter plane which corresponds most clearly to what Goldmann terms the 'maximum possible consciousness' of the group. 'Any great literary or artistic work', he argues,

is the expression of a world vision. This vision is the product of a collective group consciousness which reaches its highest expression in the mind of a poet or a thinker. The expression which his work provides is then studied by the historian who uses the idea of the



world vision as a tool which will help him to deduce two things from the text: the essential meaning of the work which he is studying and the meaning which the individual and partial elements take on when the work is looked at as a whole.<sup>38</sup>

Goldmann employs this notion of the world vision, with some considerable success, in his studies of Kant, Pascal and Racine. There he relates the structure of the 'tragic vision' as a world vision both to the structure of the philosophical writings of Pascal and Kant, and of the theatre of Racine, and to the social structure of seventeenth-century France and eighteenth-century Germany. The efficacy with which Goldmann is able to elucidate the internal structures of both Jansenism and Kantianism clearly suggests the value of this concept of the world vision to the sociology of literature and of philosophy.

Nonetheless, Goldmann's theory of the world vision contains within itself certain problematic elements. In the first place, it is difficult to accept his rigorous distinction between *world visions* and *ideologies*. Goldmann maintains that such a distinction can, in fact, be made on the basis of the *partial*, and hence *distorting*, character of the latter, as opposed to the *total* character of the former. In his view, only world visions, that is, those mental constructs which do not distort the nature of reality, can give rise to great works of art, since only world visions can give a *coherent* account of reality. Furthermore, Goldmann argues that world visions can only be produced by rising social classes. Indeed, he firmly maintains that we can 'link *world-views* to *social classes* so long as they still possess an ideal bearing on the totality of the human community; and . . . *ideologies* to *all other social groups*, and to social classes *in decline* when they no longer act except to defend, without much faith or confidence, privileges and acquired positions'.<sup>39</sup> Marxists have, of course, always drawn the distinction between true and false consciousnesses. However, for Marx, only true proletarian consciousness can involve the elimination of all distorting elements. All other class consciousnesses are inherently distorting in that they are always an ideological expression of the particular interests of the class concerned. This does not, though, imply that all other class consciousnesses are necessarily incoherent. Indeed, it is difficult to understand Goldmann's insistence that distortion and incoherence are necessarily related. There would appear to be no *a priori* reason why a particular ideology should not give an account of reality which is, at one and the same time, both false and internally consistent. Most ideologies are precisely of this nature. Classical